

Adjusting Election Expectations

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Elections remain both the most visible and controversial measure of democratization and democracy promotion in much of the world. During the Bush administration it became necessary for academics and other experts to again remind policy makers that elections alone did not mean democracy and that, in fact, elections sometimes did little to ameliorate existing problems and tensions in post-conflict or democratizing countries. This was part of the backlash against democracy assistance which was sparked by Bush's often reductively simple approach to the issue. Because of this backlash it became necessary to defend elections on the somewhat obvious grounds that while they may not be sufficient to make a country a democracy, it is pretty clear that a country that does not have free and fair elections cannot be a democracy.

While ideological and academic discussions about the relative import of elections became increasingly common in the past eight years, elections have continued to be held all over the world. Although it is the major post-conflict countries like Iraq and Afghanistan have gotten most of the attention, elections in other countries in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union and Asia are important too and often overlooked by the media and punditry because they are less dramatic.

In countries like Algeria, Armenia or Cambodia, elections occur with far less international media attention. Most of the donor countries who offer technical and financial support for these elections, send observers to determine the quality of the election and are otherwise closely involved with electoral processes, watch the election intently to, inevitably, determine whether the election was a step forward or backward for that country. Increasingly, however, this approach skews our understanding of elections, and thus of political development more generally.

These elections are, in many cases, better understood as a step sideways for democratic development, because in many countries elections no longer have much to do with democracy at all. These countries are no longer transitional and have consolidated as semi-democratic or semi-authoritarian regimes. In the former, elections may contribute to some, but often not significant, changes in leadership, but are less likely to facilitate meaningful democratic breakthroughs. In the latter, elections are not about choice or democracy at all but are better understood as exercises of government power. The governments of semi-authoritarian countries like Cambodia or Russia, to name only a few of many, hold elections not so that people can contest for leadership positions, but so that the government can demonstrate its power over the people by forcing them to participate in a ritual that is essentially a mockery of democratic processes.

Recognizing the evolving nature and role of elections is important not so much because, as many opponents of elections argue, elections are inherently dangerous if a country is

not “ready” for them. Down that road lies condescension and eternal international administration. Rather, donor countries need to understand that elections are no longer major events which require refocusing all other projects for eighteen months. Too frequently when an election is called in a semi-authoritarian country, money pours in for election-related work, but gets siphoned from other, lower profile, longer horizon type projects which often are more likely to impact the overall democratic progress of that country. Elections cannot, and should not be ignored, nor should we urge countries not to have them if we (whoever that is) think they are not ready, but it is important to adjust our expectations and policies to reflect the relatively muted impact elections have on democratic development in many increasingly authoritarian settings.